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CIA's clandestine services to resume assisting Contras

By Bill Gertz
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The CIA clandestine services division will resume its role in assisting Nicaragua's anti-communist resistance forces after a two-year hiatus, once the Senate approves a proposed \$100 million aide package, according to Reagan administration officials.

And in an unusual departure from other paramilitary programs, the State Department will become the lead agency in setting overall goals and objectives for the program, which is expected to spend \$70 million on military hardware and training and \$30 million in humanitarian assistance, the officials said.

The Defense Department, which in past bureaucratic turf battles with the CIA had been cut out of many clandestine operations, also will have an operational role in training rebel leaders and supplying weapons, officials said.

Responsibility for setting policy and administering the aid is outlined in House legislation passed June 25 that omits 1984 guidelines banning CIA involvement in Nicaragua. Congress curbed the CIA's role in covert Nicaraguan activities following public disclosures about the CIA's role in mining two Nicaraguan ports and in developing a rebel training manual.

Elliott Abrams, assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs, the Reagan administration official charged with overall responsibility for the aid program to the Nicaraguan resistance, said he did not expect any major revisions to be made by the Senate, which will take up the bill in the next few weeks.

Mr. Abrams said "policy control" over the program will remain with his office and that he will direct the interagency committees set up to plan paramilitary operations by an estimated 20,000 Nicaraguan resistance fighters.

"This is a program which at the operational level will be run by the CIA with significant input and expertise from DOD [Department of Defense]," Mr. Abrams said in an interview.

Asked how he expects to exercise policy control over the operations when responsibility for day-to-day, "on the ground" operations will be in the hands of CIA officials, Mr. Abrams said, "The answer is, I don't know, [but] we'll find out."

"There's no question that it's a real challenge to all of us to make this work," Mr. Abrams said. "I think the answer is personal ties, hard work, lots of attention and lots of meetings."

No current U.S. covert operations in such places as Afghanistan, Angola and Cambodia have been run by three often-competing administration bureaucracies, he said.

"If you think of analogies [with other covert operations], there are none," he said.

He said the "main asset" for U.S. officials who will direct U.S. support for the resistance is the close co-operation among administration officials developed over the past year. The State Department administered \$27 million in non-lethal aid to Nicaraguan rebels in 1985.

"I think we will be able to make it work because everybody involved in this views it as crucial, for national security reasons, that this program succeed," Mr. Abrams said.

Civilian security officials at the Pentagon have been anxious for the military to take a larger role in paramilitary programs, but have been repeatedly thwarted by CIA Director William Casey, who has enlisted the support of congressional intelligence oversight committees in keeping covert operations a CIA responsibility, one former Pentagon official said.

"At the CIA clandestine services, they say there are two main enemies: the Soviet Union and the Pentagon," the former official said.

The Pentagon's point man for Nicaraguan resistance activities reportedly will be Army Col. William C. Commee Jr., former director of U.S.-Honduran military exercises in Honduras.

At the White House, National Security Council specialist Lt. Col. Oliver North, who had been the sole U.S.

liaison with the resistance forces during the two-year ban on covert CIA activity in Nicaragua, will turn over the technical aspects of Nicaraguan covert operations to NSC Deputy Director for Intelligence Vincent Cannistravo, an administration official said.

Mr. Cannistravo has been described by intelligence sources as a "loyal CIA technocrat" on loan to the NSC from the agency.

The official, speaking on the condition of anonymity, said responsibility for dealing with the resistance was a "process change," based on anticipated passage of the aid package in the Senate.

"Special activities" — the official term for covert programs — are planned at the NSC or CIA and are implemented by the CIA's clandestine services division, which then uses its covert channels to purchase, transport and distribute weapons and other aid used in paramilitary operations.

Under Mr. Casey, funding and personnel for the CIA's clandestine services has increased dramatically since 1981, according to U.S. officials.

The improvement came after a period of severe neglect that began under President Ford and continued under the Carter administration, when Adm. Stansfield Turner was CIA director, according to former intelligence officials. Adm. Turner dismissed several hundred of the most experienced covert operations specialists, former officials said. They said it could be many years before the agency fully recovers the broad covert operations capabilities the agency maintained at its zenith in the 1960s.

"A lot of the CIA's clandestine capabilities have atrophied or been destroyed, and they're not the kind of capabilities that you can build up overnight," former CIA official David Atlee Phillips said yesterday.

CIA analysts may come prepared for their intelligence work through academic training, "but the people responsible for what someone else

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does in the jungle several thousand miles away come by their expertise in a long and difficult training process," he said.

Mr. Phillips, who once ran CIA covert operations in Latin America, said he believes it will be very difficult for the Nicaraguan paramilitary program to succeed because three bureaucracies are involved.

"You can't conduct secret operations in Macy's window," Mr. Phillips said. "I'm sorry to see that there's an operation planned that calls for one-third secrecy. I wish the agency, [CIA] had 100 percent responsibility for the operation and maintaining the secrets, or not be involved at all."